

The Morning Call

Good guy's reward

Working-class people's lawyer Fred Rooney will get prestigious award tonight.

By Ron Devlin

November 1, 2002

One look at Fred Rooney, and you just know he's the good guy.

A trace of childish innocence in his face gives the lanky Bethlehem lawyer a Jimmy Stewart-like quality of quiet trust.

In black jeans and button-down shirt, he's a kind of folk hero in the south Bethlehem melting pot where he's crafted a law practice catering to working-class families — mostly Latino — in the shadow of the hulkish remnants of Bethlehem Steel.

A two-hour drive away, at City University of New York Law School in Queens, Rooney spends several days a week helping upstart lawyers develop storefront practices that, like his, provide legal representation to folks who can't afford a \$250-an-hour legal counselor.

Kristin Booth Glen, the law school's dean, took one look at Rooney and knew he was the right person to head the innovative Community Legal Resources Network.

"Fred's so low-key, he's Midwestern in effect," says Glen, a former New York Supreme Court judge. "He captivates people, he inspires loyalty."

For bringing legal representation to the poor and a host of other social causes, including finding medical care for seriously ill children in Latin America, the Moravian College Alumni Association has chosen Rooney for its prestigious Hauptert Humanitarian Award.

The award, given to only a select few alumni, will be presented at 7:30 tonight at a reception on Moravian's Priscilla Payne Hurd campus.

Moravian, where he was an undergraduate in the early 1970s, inspired Rooney's deep sense of social justice.

The son of a Bethlehem Steel executive in New York, he came to the Bethlehem campus from an affluent upbringing on Long Island. The young Rooney might have set his sights on Washington, D.C., like his uncle, former U.S. Rep. Fred Rooney of Bethlehem.

After all, politics run in the Rooney family. His brother, state Rep. T.J. Rooney of Bethlehem, is a power in the state Legislature and the Democratic Party.

But on a trip to Colombia when he was a junior at Moravian, the child of privilege saw

human suffering, malnutrition and poverty the likes of which he had never imagined.

"I couldn't understand why we live this way and they live that way," Rooney recalled. "It's been the guiding light of my life ever since."

After graduating in CUNY Law School's first class in 1986, he took a job with Lehigh Valley Legal Services. He loved the work, but his income was so low he met federal poverty guidelines that qualified him for his own low-income legal services.

While classmates were working for big New York law firms, Rooney was driving a well-worn Chevy Nova that had to be coaxed to start every morning.

Fluent in Spanish, he set up a practice in Bethlehem and attracted Latinos clustered in the old neighborhoods off the Lehigh University campus.

"Fred was ahead of his time in addressing the needs of the Latino community," said District Justice Michele Varricchio of Allentown, a former law partner. "He sees everyone as being equal."

Key to Rooney's success, in addition to being bilingual, were his "low bono" rates. He didn't work free, known as pro bono, but charged one-third the going rate and took a client's ability to pay into account when making up the bill.

"I didn't get the whole fee, but I got something," Rooney says. "It helped pay the bills, and I was doing the right thing."

Though he didn't fully realize it, Rooney was pioneering a prototype community service law practice.

At CUNY, law school administrator Sue Bryant was thinking along the same lines.

She envisioned a network of solo practitioners, like Rooney, serving ethnic communities across the metropolitan area. By providing research services, mentors and continuing education — all the things they'd have if they worked in big law firms — storefront lawyers could make a living charging affordable legal rates, Bryan theorized.

The Community Legal Resources Network "helps lawyers become economically viable so they can serve the poor and lower middle class, who often can't afford legal representation," said Dorothy Zellner, the law school's spokeswoman. "It's a perfect fit for the school's motto: law in the service of human needs."

Studies suggest 80 percent of the legal needs of low-income Americans go unmet.

Largely because of his experience in Bethlehem, Rooney was hired to run the Community Legal Resources Network. Over five years, using grants from the Open Society Institute and the Ford Foundation, the program has grown to 100 lawyers. The

number is expected to double in the next year.

Nat Hentoff, civil liberties columnist for the Village Voice, called the network a "seminal force for justice, equal and practical." The American Bar Association journal is planning an article, and a half-dozen other colleges are looking at duplicating Rooney's program.

Roberta Chambers, who set up practice in Queens Village, is typical of the network's members.

Fifteen years ago she came to New York from Jamaica. She didn't have a green card, but she did have a dream: to become a lawyer.

She became a registered nurse, but always held on to the idea that someday she would be a lawyer. She enrolled in CUNY — the most diverse law school in the nation — and achieved her dream five years ago.

Now, with the network's help, she runs a neighborhood law practice in a converted storefront. Immigrants, social workers and bus drivers come to her for advice on divorce, child custody and bankruptcy.

"I handle average-type people stuff," said Chambers, sitting in front of a wall of used law books she picked up at auction.

Chambers charges \$150 an hour, compared with the going New York rate of \$250 for consultation and \$500 for court appearances. Rarely is she paid the full fee.

"Many times I have a client who's out of work and we negotiate a fee or work out a payment plan," she says. "I have people who swear by me. They always come back and bring others with them."

The Rooney system is working in Queens, as it has in Bethlehem.

Rooney's vision and decades of hard work have paid off for the 49-year-old.

He has two law partners, Lori Mannicci and Linda Gardner. They handle the day-to-day operations, while Rooney commutes to New York and does pro bono work for schools and community organizations.

"My part in the firm is not to generate income," he said. "A very large percentage of what I do is pro bono or low bono."

Roberta Chambers and the lawyers in the network, Rooney predicts, will follow the same path. They, too, will get to the point where they are no longer dependent solely on low bono fees.

He's confident that they, like he, will always give generously of their legal talent.

"The idea is to never completely get away from the communities that gave you your start," he said. "When you're blessed with good fortune, you need to give something back."